FROM DAN RATHER'S 'THE CAMERA NEVER BLINKS'

The FBI 'tape' on Martin Luther King

Maybe—Dan Rather thinks now—he should have followed up on that story of the "bedroom" tapes on Martin Luther King. But he found the idea of taping, and the tape itself, so repulsive, he couldn't even bring himself to listen to it all.

THERE WAS ONLY ONE white face in the room and it was mine. The time, the summer of 1962. I had walked into a private home in Albany, Georgia, determined to meet the man who had shaken America's concept of itself as a fair and benevolent society: the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

The civil rights movement had begun in Alabama in the late 1950s. King had angered many whites, and disconcerted others, with his talk of equality now and passive resistance. But they did not mark him as dangerous until he led his followers into the streets. This country will tolerate almost anything as long as you don't block traffic.

That day in Albany the scene was chaotic, telephones ringing, someone trying to arrange bail for an undetermined number of people, someone else attempting to work out a statement with a spokesman for the police chief about what would happen the next day. I couldn't see Dr. King through the layers of people around him.

Finally I recognized Andrew Young, talking with a baby-faced young black whose name, I learned later, was Julian Bond. I tried to introduce myself to Young. He didn't even turn his head. I was just another reporter. I finally reached out and grabbed his shirt sleeve and said, "Hey, I want you to listen to me for fifteen seconds." That got his attention.

Meets King

"I want to meet Dr. King," I said. "My name is Rather. With CBS. I'm going to be here for however long it takes to cover this story and I'm not about to begin my work without knowing one of the principal figures. And I'd like your help."

He studied me. "Okay," Young said, "I heard you out. Right? And I can tell you, it isn't going to happen."

I waited a moment, then said, "Now let me tell you. I don't want any trouble. But I am going to meet him. What I'd really like to do is meet him under the best circumstances. But if you insist, I'll make my own arrangements."

Young cocked his head. He walked away from me, and in a moment he was back with Dr. King. To my surprise King seemed genuinely interested when we were introduced. It was more than, hello, how are you, glad to see you here. He said, "Let's sit down and talk for a moment."

We found a couch and sat down. My first impression was that in the midst of all the disorder Dr. King was secure within himself, under control. He had his own thoughts together, knew what he was doing. He often talked, as I got to know him, about a quality he called "peace at the center." He had it. If you had walked into that room, that day, and looked at him, you would have thought this was the only man in that house, maybe in the entire country, who had a sense of peace. I later came to feel that this image was studied on his part. I think he knew the value of projecting an aura of calm.

He had another capacity that impressed me. He listened. Later, I would see him in a crowd with a hundred or more people milling around, tugging, trying to shake his hand, get his ear, all talking at once. If he and I were talking even for only a few seconds, I knew I had his full attention.

It is possible, of course, that I am making his courtesy seem more than it was. Maybe he just wanted to get out of the middle of the maelstrom. But I found Dr. King asking three questions to every one of mine. He asked where I was from, how long I had been in television, how I happened to be assigned to Albany.

I told him I was relieving someone else. Then the next question seemed to pop out of nowhere. He asked me what denomination I was. Not what religion. He took it for granted I was a Christian. I said, "Lutheran. I was raised a Baptist but my wife converted me."

He chuckled a little and said, "That's the usual way. Women convert men, rather than the other way around."

All the while Dr. King paid attention. His eyes were not flitting around the room. His mind, as far as I could tell, was not on something else. He wasn't just going through the motions. Soon one of his aides appeared and Dr. King stood and said, very formally, "I'm sorry, but I have to go now, Mr. Rather."

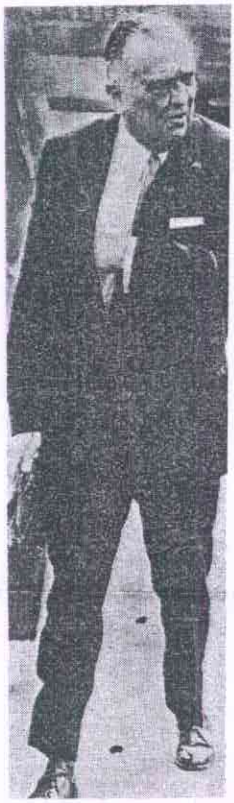
Our contacts would become less ceremonious over the years. But though I interviewed him several times that summer, in Albany, I was never able to talk to Dr. King alone.

In view of the disclosures that pelted the news throughout 1975-1976, many of Dr. King's suspicions of the FBI evidently were justified. It would be difficult, I think, to overstate his suspicions. As for the now infamous "bedroom" tapes that purport to expose Dr. King in a series of — in the Victorian term — compromising positions, I heard the first of them in 1964. I doubted their authenticity then and still do.

The fact is, I know nothing of Dr. King's sex life, didn't want to know then and don't want to know now. The subject is not one I have any taste for, and I consider the tapes largely the product of J. Edgar Hoover's warped feelings about Dr. King.

I happened to hear another reporter talking one day about "the tape." I said that I had never heard of its existence and that nothing in my experience, my contacts with King, would lead me to believe that such activities could have happened. This reporter, safe to say, was not an admirer of King. He was pleased to accept anything about him that was derogatory.

I was not exactly rising to the defense of King. I simply said, "Let's not talk from emotion. Let's talk about facts." I said flatly that I did not believe the tape existed.



Andrew Young (foreground, right photo) and Martin Luther King Jr. marching in Selma, Ala., in 1965. Above, Hoover two years later en route to testify on civil disorders before a presidential commission.

The next day he brought a copy around and with some gleefulness played it. I asked where the tape came from, and he said from another reporter, and that reporter had gotten it from another. About a third of the way through I just said, "Shut it off."

The tape was so completely repulsive that I could tolerate no more, and I'm not being pious. I will say this. I fault myself for not following up on what was a valid story — true or not. The source should have been tracked. It developed, at the least, that the FBI distributed and may even have manufactured the tape.

I don't know that the tape was a fake. But it would have been easy enough to do; certainly, if you wanted to discredit someone as badly as Hoover did Dr. King. The sad fact is that, although J. Edgar Hoover was a religious and a moral man, he had a racist strain in his character. From the outset Dr. King believed himself to be a target of the FBI. But he did not have a deep-rooted distrust of all whites, as some of those around him did. He certainly did not feel hatred. More than that, his basic philosophy was to see each individual as a human being.

I was in the CBS studios in New York on April 4, 1968, the night the bulletin from Memphis hit the wire that Martin Luther King had been shot. I had long since left the civil rights beat, had served a turn at the White House, gone overseas, and covered the war in Vietnam.

But I remembered Memphis.

The instant someone tore the copy off the wire and read the paragraph out loud, I picked up the phone and dialed from memory the police station in Memphis. There wasn't time to look up the number or go through an operator. I harkened back to Dallas and Kennedy. The switchboard would be jammed almost immediately. I had to get and keep an open line, if I could.

A reporter half ran through the newsroom asking if anyone had any sources. I shouted back, "I'm on the line to the Memphis police now. The cop on the switchboard knew nothing. When I said, "This is Dan Rather, with CBS News, in New York," he almost hung up on me. He didn't want to be involved. New York. CBS. Red flags everywhere.

Finally he said, "I can't keep this line open. If you want to talk to someone, tell me now."

I said, "Give me the police chief."

"He's not here."

"Then give me homicide."

The questions

What went through my mind was this: If I could talk to someone who knew what had happened, I thought I could judge whether he was telling me the truth and how serious the situation was. The questions were like a stepladder. Was Dr. King seriously wounded? If so, was he critical? If critical, was he now dead? You ran it up just that way. The police-beat experience came into play automatically, like a computer tape activating.

I was switched to homicide. I identified myself. The cop at the other end said, "There is not a thing I can tell you."

I said, "I know that. But I only want to know one thing. Is he dead?"

He repeated, "There's not a thing I can tell you."

The second time he said that, I knew King was dead. I asked him to transfer me to the chief's office. A spokesman assigned to handle calls from the press got on the line. I told him, "I know Martin Luther King is dead and I simply need to verify that fact."

He said, "I'm not the one to verify it."

I said, "In that case I must ask you to deny it."

He said, very quickly, "I'm not denying it."

"Then it is true, I take it."

"You take it any way you want."

In the meantime I had obtained the name of the hospital from the officer in homicide, and I had another reporter contact the doctors. We soon verified that King was dead.

A bulletin

I walked over to Casey Davidson, who was helping supervise the newsroom. I said, "Casey, here's the situation: King is dead, but I don't think we ought to go with that as step one. You better prepare a bulletin though, because I'm telling you he's dead."

He asked me how I knew. I told him I had talked with two people at the police station, no denials. Another reporter had received the same response from the hospital. Casey started to turn to someone to ask them to prepare a standby bulletin—we had writers on duty for that sort of thing—but I said, "No, I'll write one." And I did, very straight.

We were the first to confirm on the air the death of the man who had led the battle to win the rights promised his people 100 years before. He had died as many, including Dr. King, had expected he would.

TOMORROW: JFK and Dallas.

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